Panic: myths and facts

The fears that keep panic going, and what the evidence says.

The fear	The facts
"I will faint."	Fainting happens when blood pressure drops suddenly. In panic, blood pressure and heart rate go up. The exception is blood and needle phobia, which works differently.
"I am having a heart attack."	Panic sensations peak within minutes and ease with rest. A heart attack does not come and go with anxiety. If your heart has been checked, these are adrenaline sensations.
"I will stop breathing."	Breathing is automatic. Your body will not let you stop. The breathless feeling comes from breathing too much, not too little.
"I will lose control."	People in panic do not run amok, crash the car or do something shocking. The alarm makes you more alert and more careful, not less.
"I am going mad."	Panic is not a sign of serious mental illness and does not lead to it. Feeling unreal is a normal effect of high arousal.
"It will never stop."	The body cannot keep producing adrenaline at that rate. Every panic attack ends, usually within ten to twenty minutes.
"Everyone can see."	Panic feels enormous from the inside. From the outside, most people notice little or nothing.
"I must have a weak or damaged body."	Panic is a strong, healthy alarm system firing at the wrong time.

The myth I have believed most strongly

How much do I believe it now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What evidence from my own experience goes against it? (How many panic attacks have I had, and how many times did the feared thing happen?)

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Testing a panic prediction

Plan a test of what you fear will happen in a panic attack.

Name _____ Date _____

What I believe will happen if I panic and do not protect myself

How strongly do I believe it?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

If I am right, what exactly would we see? How would we know it had happened?

The experiment. What will I do to test it, and which safety behaviours will I drop?

What happened

If the catastrophe did not happen, why not? (Be honest: was it luck, a safety behaviour, or because it was never going to?)

How strongly do I believe the prediction now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What is the next experiment?

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